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The Thirty-nine Steps

By JOHN BUCHAN

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(Continued.)

I supped off half those biscuits and my worming myself deep into the heather got some kind of warmth.

My spirits had risen, and I was beginning to enjoy this crazy game of hide and seek. So far I had been miraculously lucky. The milkman, the literary innkeeper, Sir Harry, the roadman and the idiotic Lancelot were all places of undeserved good fortune.

Somewhat the first success gave me a feeling that I was going to pull the thing through.

My chief trouble was that I was desperately hungry. I lay and tortured myself for the ginger biscuits merely emphasized the aching void—with the memory of all the good food I had thought so little of in London. There were Paddock's crisp sausages and fragrant shavings of bacon and shapely poached eggs—how often I had turned up my nose at them!

There were the cutlets they did at the club, and a particular ham that stood on the cold table, for which my soul lusted. My thoughts hovered over all varieties of mortal edibles, and finally settled on a porterhouse steak and a quart of bitter with a Welsh rabbit to follow. In longing hopelessly for these dainties I fell asleep.

I woke very cold and stiff about an hour after dawn.

It took me a little while to remember where I was. I had been very weary and had slept heavily. I saw first the pale blue sky through a net

of heather, then a big shoulder of hill, and then my own boots placed neatly in a blackberry bush.

I raised myself on my arms and looked down into the valley, and that one look set me facing up my boots in mad haste. For there were men below, not more than a quarter of a mile off, spaced out on the hillside like a fan, and beating the heather. Lancelot had not been slow in looking for his revenge.

I crawled out of my shelf into the cover of a boulder and from it gained a shallow trench which slanted up the mountain face. This led me presently into the narrow gully of a burn, by way of which I scrambled to the top of the ridge. From there I looked back and saw that I was still undiscovered. My pursuers were patiently quartering the hillside and moving upward.

Keeping behind the sky line, I ran for maybe half a mile till I judged I was above the uppermost end of the gully. Then I showed myself and was instantly noted by one of the flankers, who passed the word to the others.

I heard cries coming up from below and saw that the line of search had changed its direction.

I pretended to retreat over the sky-line, but instead went back the way I had come, and in twenty minutes was behind the ridge overlooking my sleeping place. From that viewpoint I had the satisfaction of seeing the pursuit streaming up the hill at the top of the gully on a hopelessly false scent.

I had before me a choice of routes, and I chose a ridge which made an angle with the one I was on and so was soon put a deep gully between me and my enemies. The exercise had warmed my blood, and I was beginning to enjoy myself amazingly. As I went I breakfasted on the dusty remnants of the ginger biscuits.

I knew very little about the country, and I hadn't a notion what I was going to do. I trusted to the strength of my legs, but I knew well enough that those behind me would be familiar with the lie of the land and that my ignorance would be a heavy handicap.

I saw in front of me a sea of hills, rising very high toward the south, but northward breaking down into broad ridges which separated wide and shallow valleys. The ridge I had chosen seemed to sink after a mile or two to a moor which lay like a pocket in the uplands.

That seemed an good a direction to take as any other.

My stratagem had given me a fair start—call it twenty minutes—and I had the width of a gully behind me before I saw the first heads of the pursuers. The police had evidently called in local talent to their aid, and the men I could see had the appearance of

herds or gamekeepers.

They halted at the sight of me, and I waved my hand. Two divided into the gully and began to climb my ridge, while the others kept their own side of the hill. I felt as if I were taking part in a schoolboy game of hare and hounds.

But very soon it began to seem less of a game. Those fellows behind were hefty men on their native heath. Looking back I saw that only three were following direct, and I guessed that the others had fetched a circuit to cut me off.

My lack of local knowledge might very well be my undoing, and I resolved to get out of this tangle of gullies to the pocket of moor I had seen from the tops. I must so increase my distance as to get clear away from them, and I believed I could do this if I could find the right ground for it. If there had been cover I would have tried a bit of stalking, but on these bare slopes you could see a fly a mile off.

My hope must be in the length of my legs and the soundness of my wind, but I needed easier ground for that. For I was not bred a mountaineer. How I longed for a good Africanander pony!

I put on a great spurt and got off my ridge and down into the moor before any figures appeared on the sky-line behind me. I crossed a burn and came out on a highroad which made a pass between two gullies.

All in front of me was a big field of heather sloping up to a crest which was crowned with an odd feather of trees.

In the dike by the roadside was a gate, from which a grass grown track led over the first wave of the moor. I jumped the dike and followed it, and after a few hundred yards—as soon as it was out of sight of the highway—the grass stopped and became a very respectable road, which was evidently kept with some care.

Clearly it ran to a house, and I began to think of going the same. Hitherto my luck had held, and it might be that my best chance would be found in this remote dwelling. Anyhow, there were trees there—and that meant cover.

I did not follow the road, but the burnside which flanked it on the right, where the brazen grew deep and the high banks made a tolerable screen. It was well I did so, for no sooner had I gained the hollow than, looking back, I saw the pursuit topping the ridge from which I had descended.

After that I did not look back. I had no time. I ran up the burnside, crawling over the open places and for a large part wading in the shallow stream. I found a deserted cottage with a row of fankon, peat stacks and an overgrown garden.

Then I was among young hay and very soon had come to the edge of a plantation of windblown firs. From there I saw the burnside of the house smoke a few hundred yards to my left. I forsook the burnside, crossed another dike and almost before I knew was on a rough lawn. A glance back told me that I was well out of sight of the pursuit, which had not yet passed the first lift of the moor.

The lawn was a very rough place, cut with a scythe instead of a mower, and planted with beds of scrubby rhododendrons. A brace of black game, which are not usually garden birds, rose at my approach. The house before me was the ordinary moorland kind with a more pretentious white washed wing added. Attached to this wing was a glass veranda, and through the glass I saw the face of an elderly gentleman meekly watching me.

I stalked over the border of coarse hill gravel and entered the open veranda door.

Within was a pleasant room, glass on one side and on the other a mass of books. More books showed in an inner room. On the floor, instead of tables, stood cases such as you see in a museum, filled with coins and queer stone implements. There was a kneehole desk in the middle, and seated at it, with some papers and open volumes before him, was the benevolent old gentleman. His face was round and shiny, like Mr. Pickwick's, big glasses stuck on the end of his nose, and the top of his head was as bright and bare as a glass bottle.

He never moved when I entered, but raised his placid eyebrows and waited on me to speak.

It was not an easy job, with about five minutes to spare, to tell a stranger who I was and what I wanted and to win his aid. I did not attempt it. There was something about the eye of the man before me—something so keen and knowledgeable—that I could not find a word. I simply stared at him and stuttered.

"You seem in a hurry, my friend," he said slowly.

I nodded toward the glass. It gave a prospect across the moor through a gap in the plantation and revealed certain figures half a mile off straggling through the heather.

"Ah, I see," he said and took up a pair of fieldglasses, through which he patiently scrutinized the figures.

"A fugitive from justice, eh? Well, we'll go into the matter at our leisure. Meantime I object to my privacy being broken in upon by the clumsy rural police. Go into my study and you will see two doors facing you. Take the one on the left and close it behind you. You will be perfectly safe. Don't leave until I send for you."

And this extraordinary man took up his pen again.

I did as I was bid and found myself in a little dark chamber which smelled of chemicals and was lit only by a tiny window high up in the wall. The door had swung behind me with a click like the door of a safe. Once again I had found an unexpected sanctuary, although I could not tell for how long.

All the same, I was not comfortable. There was something about the old gentleman which puzzled and rather terrified me. He had been too easy and ready, almost as if he had expected me. And his eyes had been horribly intelligent.

No sound came to me in that dark place.

For all I knew the police might be searching the house, and if they did they would want to know what was behind this door. I tried to possess my soul in patience and to forget how hungry I was. Then I took a more cheerful view. But I was fearful that I was about to undergo some unusual experience.

The old gentleman could scarcely refuse me a meal, and I fell to reconstructing my breakfast. Bacon and eggs would content me, but I wanted my soul in patience and to forget how hungry I was. Then I took a more cheerful view. But I was fearful that I was about to undergo some unusual experience.

"Have they gone?" I asked.

"They have gone. I convinced them that you had crossed the hill. I do not choose that the police should come between me and one whom I am delighted to honor. This is a lucky morning for you, Richard Hannay. You see that your disguise is not complete."

As he spoke his eyelids seemed to tremble and to fall a little over his keen gray eyes. In a flash the phrase of Scudder's came back to me when he had described the man he most dreaded in the world. He had said that he "could hood his eyes like a hawk."

Then I saw that I had walked straight into the enemy's headquarters. My first impulse was to throttle the old ruffian and make for the open air. He seemed to anticipate my intention, for he smiled gently and nodded to the door behind me. I turned and saw two men servants who had me covered with pistols.

He knew my name, but he had never seen me before. And as the reflection darted across my mind I saw a slender chance. I determined to brazen it out to the end.

"I don't know what you mean," I said roughly. "And who are you calling Richard Hannay? My name's Ainslie."

"So?" he said, still smiling. "But, of course, you have others. We won't quarrel about a name."

I was pulling myself together now, and I reflected that my garb, lacking coat and waistcoat and collar, would, at any rate, not betray me. I put on my surliest face and shrugged my shoulders.

"I suppose you're going to give me up after all, and I call it a dirty trick. I wish I had never seen that cursed motorcar! Here's the money, and be—"

He opened his eyes a little. "Oh, no, I shall not give you up! My friends and I will have a little private settlement with you; that is all. You know a little too much, Mr. Hannay. You are a clever actor, but not quite clever enough."

He spoke with assurance, but I could see the dawning of some doubt in his mind.

"For God's sake stop jawing!" I cried. "Everything's against me. I haven't had a bit of luck since I came on shore at Leith. What's the harm in a poor devil with an empty stomach picking up some money he finds in a bust up motorcar? That's all I done, and for that I've been chivvied for two days by those blasted bobbies over those blasted hills. Tell you, I'm fair sick of it. You can do what you like old boy! Ned Ainslie's got no fight left in him."

I could see that the doubt was gaining.

"Will you oblige me with the story of your recent doings?" he asked.

"I can't, guv'nor," I said in a real beggar's whine. "I've not had a bite to eat for two days. Give me a mouthful of food, and then you'll hear God's truth!"

I must have showed my hunger in my face, for he signaled to one of the men in the doorway. A bit of cold pie was brought and a glass of beer, and I wolfed them down like a pig, or, rather, like Ned Ainslie, for I was keeping up my character.

In the middle of my meal he spoke suddenly to me in German, but I turned on him a face as blank as a stone wall. I was steered to carry the deception to a finish.

TODAY'S WANTS
ANNUAL SUPPER and entertainment given by St. Anthony's Parish at their hall, Colorado avenue, Thursday evening, June 22nd. Supper served from 5 to 8 p. m. R 29 d*

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